

Ex-EVPL Trustee was 'bullied'

Shetler intimidated her
over Drag Queen event

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EVANSVILLE, Ind. — The Evansville-Vanderburgh Public Library trustee who lost her seat Wednesday amid the controversy over the Drag Queen Story Hour said she's been "lied to, bullied, intimidated and threatened" by District 2 County Councilman Tom Shetler Jr., over the Feb. 23 event.



Williams

Barbara Coyle Williams was not reappointed Wednesday as the Vanderburgh County Council's appointee to the EVPL board.

She said she felt bullied and intimidated by Shetler's constant calls over the issue.

"It went from concerned citizen to 'this is not going to happen in this community.' He said, 'If you don't do something, you're probably not going to be reappointed to the library

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board.”

Shetler said he didn't intimidate Williams but rather called out of "courtesy." He said he nominated Williams to join the EVPL board four years ago.

"I felt that I owed it to her — based on conversations I had with other members of Council who were equally upset as I was — that we were not representing the taxpayers in the proper way," he said. "I don't take that as bullying. I think that was a good, honest conversation that I had with someone who was representing my values and the Council's values. We (Council members) all stood (Wednesday) with what our values are, and we had someone there that wasn't representing those values."

Shetler said the EVPL board was given a less than 48 hours notice that Drag Queen Story Hour would be on their agenda in December's meeting. He said EVPL administration had planned this event for over 18 months.

He encouraged Williams to ask for a postponement of the event for a few months until the Trustees had time to "study and look at it."

"I said 'If someone put me in this kind of position and I was a board member, I'd have some serious problems with someone putting me in that type of predicament on such a controversial issue,'" Shetler said. "I would ask that you would do that. I think that that's fair.' Honestly, she agreed to do that but it did not materialize at the January board meeting."

Williams said she is in favor of the event and feels the dialogue is good for the community. She said fellow Trustees have not been contacted by their appointing authorities.

"I'm frustrated because this is something that I really love to do," she said. "I'm proud of the service I had on the board. I'm disappointed that my independence, experience, hard work, dedication and standing in this community doesn't count for anything more than 'if you don't do what I want you to do on the board — you're not going to get reappointed.'"

In November, Williams received a letter from Council asking if she wanted to be re-appointed to the library's board. She said she was happy to continue and submitted her letter and resume.

"All indications were that I would be reappointed," she said. "And then this (Drag Queen Story Hour) came up. This is all Tom Shetler's doing. I think it's very scary and wrong to use one's political position to try and move their personal religious views forward."

The event has drawn criticism and support from the community since it was first announced late last year. Many individuals against the event have requested that Commissioners, County Council and the EVSC hold public hearings to remove and replace their current appointees on the EVPL board.

Drag Queen Story Hour is a national program where drag queens and kings read books chosen by library staff to children. The targeted age for the program is children under 11 and their parents. It is scheduled for Feb. 23 at EVPL North Park.

Williams served as the board's secretary before County Council decided it was time for a "fresh face,"

they said during the meeting. Williams' four-year term expired Dec. 31, and Council voted 6-1 to appoint Richard Clements to replace her.

Shetler said the EVPL board has not been doing its job efficiently and hopes the new appointee will make the board more accountable.

"I felt like we need some different representation on the EVPL board that are going to ask the hard questions from the taxpayers' standpoint," Shetler said. "That (Drag Queen Story Hour event) opened a can of worms. They are a judiciary board and are supposed to take votes on direct policy and (long-term) strategy."

The EVPL board votes all the time, Williams emphasized.

"Our duties are laid out in the statute," she said. "This is a very complicated responsibility that we have. We have complete authority over the library. What we don't do is micromanage programs. There are literally hundreds of story hours going in a year's time."

Williams said Shelter has been calling her since the December meeting. He expressed that she should've done or said something when the words "drag queen" were spoken, she said.

"He was trying to get me to do something to stop this and then he said 'the only acceptable response I could've made was to slam my fist on the table and say 'this is not going to happen in our community,'" she explained. "Then he came up to me at the meeting and shook his finger in my face, I felt rather intimidated."

During the meeting, the EVPL board decided to move forward with the program. Williams did not speak against having the program.

"The day of the meeting in January, he told me what I did at the board meeting would determine whether or not I was reappointed," she said, referring to a phone call prior to the EVPL board meeting.

The one vote against the new appointee came from Councilwoman Stephanie Terry, who spoke highly of Williams' success in her professional career and the impact she's had on the library through her work on the EVPL board.

Terry said although she did not vote in favor of Clement's nomination, she doesn't have an issue with the new appointee.

Williams has been a lawyer for 39 years and has a masters degree in library science.

"I think not reappointing Barbara is a great loss to the EVPL board," Terry said. "She was one of the most qualified trustees that they had based on her background."

The EVPL Board is made up of seven appointees. EVSC appoints three, County Council two and County Commissioners two.

One County Commissioner appointee, Andy Ozete, resigned amid the controversy but hasn't spoken about why he stepped down. Commissioners have been called into question their other appointee, Sabrina Stewart-Thomas, although there has been no vote about removing her or replacing Ozete.

EVSC Board President Karen Ragland said they will not remove their appointees to the library board during their meeting earlier this month.

"I trust the EVPL will continue to make program decisions in the best interest of their patrons and our community," she said.